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Lafayette – A Castaway In Kentucky

Helen S. Wilcox

In 1824, Lafayette was invited to visit this country as a guest of the American Nation. In mid-August of that year, he landed in New York and from that time until his departure in September 1825 he visited all of the twenty-four states of the Union. Americans gave him honors and ovations with each community vying with others in the celebrations, banquets, balls, and parades. He was accompanied by his valet, Bastien, his secretary, Auguste Levasseur, and his son, George Washington Lafayette.

In February 1825, the Lafayette party set out on a tour of the Southern States. It had to be a "quick" trip because he had promised to be in Boston June 17 for the ceremonies at Bunker Hill. They travelled by steamer, horseback and a carriage loaned him by Mrs. Eliza Custis. He received honors, gifts, and salutes all thru the South.

There was a memorable visit with Andrew Jackson in Nashville, where he was received in the most gracious manner. A public dinner was given in his honor which Timothy Demonbreun (recte: Jacques-Timothe De Montbrun), the first white man to settle in Tennessee, attended. After all the adulations had ended, the Marquis boarded a chartered steamer, the **Mechanic**, for Louisville. After coming down the Cumberland River, their steamer turned up the Ohio, paddling full-steam ahead against the four mile current. Lafayette, happy to be finally headed eastward for his promised visit to Boston, never dreamed what was ahead. About midnight May 8, he was awakened by a terrific shock that stopped the boat near the mouth of Deer Creek, one hundred twenty-five miles south of Louisville. George and Levasseur ran to the deck to ascertain what had happened; other passengers were in a state of panic. The captain determined that the steamer had hit a snag in the river and it would sink any minute. Lafayette in the meantime was very calmly being dressed by his valet. Impatiently, his son and Levasseur seized him by the arms and led him to the door; when halfway up to the deck he went hastily back to the room to get his snuff box containing Washington's portrait. All other gifts were left behind in the room.

The General insisted that all the others should be saved first, especially since there was only one life-boat. But everyone stood back and waited for him to get into the skiff and with his stiff leg (not from the wound at Brandywine but from a fall) and the tossing waves, it was a ticklish situation. Two men took him under the arms and Levasseur got into the boat and carefully they lowered him into it.

As they rowed to the Kentucky Shore, the Marquis suddenly realized that George was not with him and the calmness that had always been with him in any danger was gone. Immediately he began shouting for George while limping up and down the shore. After numerous trips rowing to the **Mechanic** and many anxious minutes for Lafayette, Levasseur found George and Bastien clinging to the wreckage safe and sound.

When all had reached the shore and were counted, they found that none had been lost except a little dog given to the Marquis by a friend, General Barnard of Washington. He often related the tragic end of this dog and appeared to regret the loss as one of the greatest that had ever befallen him.

It began to rain and fires were built on the Kentucky shore for everyone to huddle around and wait for morning. A mattress floated ashore and the General lay down on it and very calmly went to sleep. At dawn, the passengers looked at one another and laughed at such a motley array. The Governor of Tennessee had lost his wig and his shoes; most had come away lacking full attire. Lafayette had lost his carriage, his luggage, and six hundred unanswered letters about which he was even jubilant.

The captain rowed to the vessel and brought back smoked venison, some biscuits, a case of Bordeaux, and a keg of Madeira wine. Some fifty people sat down to a tasty breakfast. By nine o'clock that morning two steamboats, the **Paragon** and the **Highland Laddie**, came down the river. The **Paragon**, bound for New Orleans from Louisville and one of the finest and largest steamboats, was stopped and ordered by her owner, a Mr. Neilson, who just happened to be a passenger on the **Mechanic** to turn back to Louisville. They arrived without further mishap on May 11.

The **Saturday Evening Post** of June 11, 1825, quoted from the Boston **Gazette**, which upon noticing the accident to General Lafayette observed

that his life has been a continued series of fearless action and miraculous escapes—with him motion is pleasure, and danger a common business. If he lives to finish his tour through the United States he will, probably, have travelled more miles in the same number of months, and written more answers to addresses, than any man ever did before, in any age or country. In fact, his journey is unique in the history of man. Without power, without command—he commands all wills, and controls all hearts. If the circumstances were not fixed upon record by a thousand presses, future ages would place the story in the region of fable.

Another example of the affection expressed publicly for Lafayette is the following poem, reprinted from the Russellville, Kentucky **Weekly Messenger** of Saturday, May 14, 1825, concerning his visit to Nashville on May 4, just before his shipwreck:

ON THE ARRIVAL OF LAFAYETTE IN NASHVILLE

BY A LADY

ALL HAIL! The friend of freedom comes!
Pleasure, glow in every breast!
Welcome, dwell on every tongue;
Welcome to the "**Nation's Guest!**"

Joy usher in the laughing hours,
With all your gaily smiling train;
Strew the way with fairest flowers:
Strew fresh garlands o'er the plain;

Bring fragrant wreaths empearl'd with dew,
And lay them blushing, at his feet:
There, let their twining sweets exhale,
A welcome to the brave FAYETTE.

Blow soft ye winds in breezes pure,
As glows the high heart in his brest, (sic)
And waft o'er every swelling gale,
A grateful welcome to our guest.

Fill high the bowl with mantling wine,
Quaff the beverage rosy, sweet:
And every sparkle on the brim,
Be a welcome to FAYETTE.

Music, strike up your gayest measure;
Tuning every heart to pleasure;
And still the joyous note repeat:
Still be the burthen of your song,
Echo'd through all the enraptured throng,
Welcome, welcome LAFAYETTE!